

Introduction

Following Jesus can be difficult.

In principle, we all probably would tell others that following after our master Jesus is worth it. But down deep, sometimes—some of us at least—get tired. It's not that we even want to go out and rob a bank, or become a drug dealer—something overt. It's just that attaining and maintaining spiritual vitality can be so tiring.

Why bother with Bible reading, prayer, the Lord's day, the Lord's table, fellowship of the saints, and all the rest? Isn't life busy enough? And aren't the pressures too great around us to keep up the effort?

It's that old "trinity" of the world, the flesh, and the devil.¹ It just ain't easy! But before we feel too sorry for ourselves, it never has been very easy.

Turn to Acts 12.

Explanation

Remember that Peter was released from prison by an angel. He is so overwhelmed by the events that "he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision" (12:9). Indeed, the angel had to remind Peter to dress himself, to put his sandals on, to wrap his cloak around himself, and then follow the angel out of jail.

Peter, having escaped from jail, then snuck through the streets under the cover of darkness to the house where many of the disciples were gathered. Rhoda, a servant girl of the house, was so overjoyed and stunned when she discovered Peter knocking at the door that she forgot to open the gate! Peter had to continue knocking until others came and let him in.

Though we can read some humor into these events, going back to verse 1 reminds us of the seriousness of those days. The situation in which the disciples were living was oppressively dangerous.

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the

¹ See the 1662 BCP, "The Litany", "Collect for The 18th Sunday after Trinity", "The Ministration of Public Baptism of Infants", "Making of Deacons", "Ordering of Priests".

church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.²

Herod Agrippa the 1st was not quite as extravagant in his violence and cruelty as his grandfather, Herod the Great. That Herod, who was ruling at the time of Jesus' birth, was the one responsible for the slaughter of the innocent toddlers in Bethlehem.

This Herod, the grandson, was like the grandfather, in that he fancied himself a favorite of the Jews. That aspect of his character explains what we see here at the beginning of chapter 12. Even though some 7 or 8 years have passed since the ascension, the followers of Jesus were still considered pests (at least) and (at worst) heretical to the Jews and potentially treasonous political enemies by Rome.

We don't know exactly what it means when verse 1 speaks of "violent hands", but it means at the very least imprisonment, and that was not the polite sort of imprisonment of our day!

In the case of James, it appears that Herod himself used his own sword to kill James. As it says in verse 3, "he saw that it pleased the Jews" when he killed James. If a little bit of blood is good, more is better! So Herod had Peter picked up and he intended to bring Peter out as a public display and likely execution after the Passover feast was finished.

These were the immediate circumstances of chapter 12—pretty oppressive. The larger context was even worse. Outside of these specific events, the Christian community has been under pressure and persecution for some time. The past 7 or 8 years had not been easy.

- Already there had been an attempt has leveraging public opinion to gain favor and praise: Ananias and Sapphira (5).
- The Jewish leaders had begun to try to tamp down this rebellion against

² 12:1–4.

the establishment—something they thought that they had accomplished in the death of Jesus (5).

- There had been internal conflicts between the Greek speaking Jews and the Hebrew speaking Jews (6).
- Stephen had been stoned to death (7).
- Paul had been hard on their heels, “ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison” (8).
- Even after Paul’s conversion, many of the disciples still weren't sure of his intentions (9).
- While there were some Romans who had sympathy for Christians, or even believed (Cornelius, 10), they certainly did not constitute the majority of those in that region of Palestine.
- As a result of his time with Cornelius, some criticized Peter for eating with Gentiles; so again Satan tries to breed internal discord (11).
- Persecution had driven many from their homes into regions far away (11:19).
- Oh yes, lest anyone think that life was about to become normal, Agabus prophetically indicates that there will be a great famine all over the world (11:28)!

And now Herod decides to entertain the Jews by persecuting Christians.

Interpretation

And for what reason? What got these people into these problems in the first place? They are pursued by royalty, persecuted by religious leaders, and have now been driven from their homes and homeland. It would seem as if the whole world is against them.

They followed Jesus.

But what do we expect from living in a fallen world? Isn't that the nature of our three enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil?

The World

The world—the external environment—presses in on us with demands, with seductive promises about everything from toothpaste to financial security.

Remember the message and mission of Jesus. We could understand the opposition against followers of Jesus much better if this group of people were advocating the overthrow of the government, seeking to assassinate government leaders, denying the existence of God, or such things. That would make sense.

But no, their message is one of mutual interdependence, care for those around them, whatever their convictions about life are—even to the point that they were to love their enemies! Their ethics are comprised of being thrifty, telling the truth, being committed in marriage, humility, and such other dangerous behaviors and doctrines.

Other humans, who can be helpers, encouragers, and partners in the pleasures of life, can also be our opponents, enemies, covetous of what we have and they want. Our own families may oppose us, or be sources of misery rather than joy or pride.

This doesn't even begin to take into account cruelty, violence, racism and other irrational prejudices, lies, theft, and all the rest of the commandments that get broken.

The Flesh

Our own flesh—our internal environment—has learned the lessons of the world all too well.

- There can be great beauty, but it can get marred.
- Pleasure, yet the pleasure can become addictive.
- Great loves, and yet love is fickle, both our love and that which we love.
- We are blessed with emotion and feeling, and yet, instead of understanding emotions as responses to life, we can see them as guides for life.
- Time, which provides us with an ordered framework of effort and result, has become an enemy, with death always looming over our heads.
- Our bodies, which can be glorious instruments of strength and ingenuity, fail us.

The Devil

And the devil—that hungry lion who growls and prowls and seeks to devour our souls—he hates us, God, creation, and even himself. What he loves is destruction, death, and lies. As foolish as he is in the eternal sense, he is just as clever and intelligent when it comes to opposing God, the incitement of conflict, and taking advantage of our weaknesses.

Two Key Themes of 2018

The two great themes on which we are concentrating this year—fellowship and discipleship—even those simple things are hard. There are too many things that we *can* do and we sometimes fail to weigh what we *should* do. We pursue the good, because we can't quite see the better and the best.

Following Jesus gets pushed to second place, third place, or no place at all. And fellowship, well, that's just another can of worms. People are complex, unpredictable, independent, needy, encouraging at one moment and cutting at the next. Fellowship is a great idea when it's just coffee and donuts. When it means actually getting to know each other, working through disagreement, living with differences of opinion—who needs that complication?

Application

This returns me to my original theme; why continue on? Why did these early Christians press on in spite of the concentrated opposition to them?

*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.*³

Herod's Fate

Starting at vs 20.

Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food.

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the

³ Proverbs 14:12, 16:25.

throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

- Herod had power and influence. That's the point of the reference to how the people of Tyre and Sidon depended on Herod.
- He had charisma and admirers. Sycophantic crowds praised his speaking skills and his glorious appearance.
- He had had no humility before God. Yes, this bombastic blowhard Herod did have the power of the sword. That is legitimately frightening, imposing, intimidating. But he died a miserable death, without hope for eternity.

God's "Fate"

I love this little innocent phrase in vs 24.

*But the word of God increased and multiplied.*⁴

God's word "increased and multiplied".

God is neither impressed with the world, nor the flesh, nor the devil, nor Herod in all his glory.

Not following Christ is harder than following him.

*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.*⁵

And again:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are

⁴ 12:20–24.

⁵ Galatians 6:7–9.

transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always of good courage.⁶

Finally:

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.⁷

As some of you have reminded me from time to time—we know how this game ends. We know who wins.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:6.

⁷ John 16:33.